

Listening Closer

Jennifer Qian

Submitted to the faculty of the Herron School of Art and Design
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art
in the Herron School of Art and Design
Indiana University

May 2016

Listening Closer

By
Jennifer Qian
Master of Fine Arts

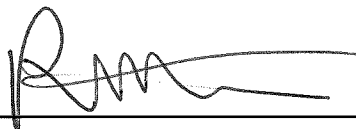
Herron School of Art and Design
IUPUI
Indiana University



Associate Professor Eric Nordgulen
Thesis Committee Advisor



Associate Professor Vance Farrow
Thesis Committee Member

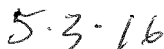


Associate Professor Robert Horvath
Thesis Committee Member

Accepted: May 2016



Professor Valerie Eickmeier
Dean of Herron School of Art and Design



Date

To hear is a simple act but to listen is to react. Our bodies register sensory experiences before the mind becomes aware of it. When our body listens with its ears, eyes, heart and the rest of its limbs, it functions as a lyrical instrument. This lyrical instrument receives and translates sound into body language. Our bodies can register sounds outside the human hearing range, detect vibrations, and even sense another person's emotions. As translators, our bodies have the tools to receive sounds and interpret them. We use this all the time, voluntarily and involuntarily, to face someone when speaking, to step forward to offer help, to flinch when a loud noise startles us, to tap our feet to the beat of music and so on. Noticing how our bodies respond demands attention and practice. The first step is to listen.

Listening to my body is easily accessible to me because I was born deaf. I received cochlear implant surgery at the age of four in order to hear. At the flip of a speech processor switch, I can easily hear everything or nothing at all. This interchangeability enhances my sensitivity as an observer in multiple environments or situations. Also because I lacked one of the five senses, my other senses became heightened. Without hearing, I learned to readily understand human body language. Therefore, in my art making process, I apply the same theory to my other senses. For example, when I work with clay sculpture, I use my whole body to be physically challenged, to be contorted and stretched to reach otherwise inaccessible places to sculpt. When I draw or paint for hours, I keep going even when my hands begin to ache. It is my artistic philosophy to be physically expressive and to be close with the material I work with. This same philosophy is how I grow in my personal life, it enables me to become aware of my bodily identity, cultural identity and personal identity. I can hear beyond words with my other senses, my feelings and my body. My works portray these experiences by

emulating my relationship with sound and the way it affects my body. The idea behind my work is to invoke a deeper bodily awareness through mental projection, sensory experience and voluntary gestures.

My circumstances may seem unique but they are not. I was born in Ohio, grew up for twelve years in North Carolina, four years in Hong Kong, one year in China and three years in Chicago. Living in different cities, going to different schools, meeting different people and experiencing different cultures has enabled me to see how much I am not aware of. Learning from years of observation, I consciously strive to appreciate the moments, care for others and live modestly. Like me, my work is nomadic—it wanders from material to material yet remains consistent in exploring self-adaptation and perspective on life.

Adaptation is a large aspect of life and I consciously strive to adapt daily. I compromise my body, not just my ears, eyes or head but also my arms, torso and legs, to hear others better. My installation of multiple ceramic cones are best experienced by an inquisitive audience who are willing to compromise their bodies to closely hear and experience the works. Take a hollow sculpture on the floor for example, the viewer would have to bend their knees slightly and tilt their head in order to see through the sculpture. But at what point does the viewer recognize their actions as voluntary or involuntary? As a result, the viewer experienced a form of bodily awareness. José Luis Bermúdez, in his article “Bodily Awareness and Self-Consciousness”, advocates self-awareness through the body, “Bodily awareness is a basic form of self-consciousness through which perceiving agents are directly conscious of the bodily self” (Bermúdez). This type of audience engagement requires physical stimulation, bodily compromise, voluntary and involuntary reactions but the overall goal is to manipulate the

audience to move and hear differently. As a result, the possibilities of promoting self-adaptation can become realized.

Judging from how we move, how we behave and how we act and react, our body language reveals more than we think. People have what I identify as lyrical responses, which occur when one's mind and body are synced. Being an observer allows me to notice this connection is most effective when both mind and body are properly nurtured. In the art making process, it's important to nurture my physical body with physical duress in order to be expressive through my sculpture. In the end, it is through this process that I am able to channel myself through the sculpture and work towards a series of works that become vessels for experience.

Our lyrical responses occur when our mind-body sync is in harmony. We've all experienced having a conversation without skipping a beat. It can be best described when someone 'is on a roll' and feels unstoppable. It is not necessarily a case of adrenaline or a feeling of rush, rather it is more of a case of mind and body expressing itself as one unstoppable force. For lyrical responses to reach optimal levels, our bodies must be acknowledged as expressive tools meant to be used to the fullest capacity. The mind and body are intricately integrated, they *are* one, but we mostly tap into it unconsciously. It is not a permanent state of being so I condition myself into my inner-self and find a way to become immersed while being involved in the process-making. To some, this conditioning may be known as self-discipline –the more I return into a certain state of being, the more easily I can become immersed within myself. It is most successful when I can work for hours tirelessly and time would just fly by. My mind and body working together in conjunction often produces immensely satisfying and

incredible results. It is successful not only in my process-making but also anywhere else in my life. I can purposely be physically expressive with my body, to practice self-discipline to learn new habits and be situationally aware of my surroundings and people around me.

Lyrical responses do not happen easily, especially when it is done consciously. In the case of a mind-body disconnection, it leads to an 'off' lyrical response. If that sync is really off, contradictions happen and one can sense something is not right. We've experienced our bodies being out of sync for a whole day where we may experience clumsiness, delayed responses or low motivational willpower. Often chalked up to bad luck or a bad day, this out-of-sync series of events are due to the body and mind disconnection. We can even sense if someone's got a mind-body disconnection – our bodies can sense a dissonance or discomfort if another person is hiding something. For example, lying, one of the human behavior that threatens the mind-body connection, requires a lot of effort, the body overcompensates and undergoes stress. Adam Dachis writes in his article *What Lying Actually does to Your Brain and Body Every Day*, "When you lie you have to consider what you're trying to hide, figure out a believable version of the opposite, give a convincing performance to sell that lie, and then remember it for the rest of eternity so you never get caught." (Dachis). Our bodies are important tools that help us gauge and translate what is in front of us—it enables us to adapt to and sync with our surroundings. My installation of ceramic cones work towards manipulating the viewer's body language in such a way that the viewer becomes aware of the steps their body took to approach an object. My cones serve to enable viewers to experience bodily movement and

question their inner-awareness. The body is as expressive as language so it is important to listen to our body language just as much as verbal language.



Figure 1: *Self-Portrait 2015*, wood panel and mixed media, is a piece part of an installation involving audio and audience movement

Bodily movement can be attributed to voluntary and involuntary action. This installation piece as seen in Figure 1 was the first step in my process towards manipulating audience movement. A self-portrait wooden panel installed in a corner of a room, it is suspended by one thin thread and the panel's side ends rest on each wall of the corner. It is roughly 3 feet wide and 15 inches in height. It hangs approximately five feet tall so the panel is at eye level. The panel is a thin sheet of plywood with a beautiful water-like grain texture on it. Painted on the panel are three heads rising out of the water-like grain. They all are the same figure with swimming goggles on, representing my childhood experiences of swimming in water. There is an audio recording hidden in the corner behind the panel. From far away, the audio recording sounds like static resulting from the echo-ey quality of the gallery space. When the viewer comes closer, the audio becomes clearer and sounds like trickling water. With the panel in the way, viewers end up moving their bodies up or down in order to hear the sound better. Rather than to face sound directly, I usually move my body around sound to hear better. If I am having a conversation with someone, I watch their lips and turn my head and body to the side so my

ear can directly face them. This is how I move myself to hear others better and the audience is able to do the same.

Adaption comes in many forms and one of them is projection. Projection is a tool that allows us to play out our self-identities. When two people exchange words, they exchange personal information, self-attained knowledge and essentially, they are exchanging parts of themselves. We behave differently in certain environments and with different people. Our attitude and posture changes when speaking with an elderly person, a man in a suit or a child. We also mentally project ourselves *through* sound when speaking, clapping and tapping. Typically, projection occurs through negative space, for example a tunnel, a void, a hole or through a window, an arch or any other framed space. The negative space anywhere does not necessarily have to be a framed space – my works serve to frame negative space in order to frame an experience for the audience. Framed negative spaces best represent the unknown in which humans have a biological imperative to look, to attempt to see in order to understand the unknown. Most of my ceramic objects have the general shape of cones, tunnels or bowls. While the material of clay is familiar to us, the form and shape is strange to us so it is approached cautiously. The sensory cones embody the negative space in which we are tempted to look. The emptiness is where everything happens or is born out of. Humans are social beings, whose existence is based off one another – because interrelationships grant our existences validity. I know I exist because other people acknowledge my existence. When people talk to one another, they are swapping information. It is through this process that they are swapping parts of their own self to one another, a trade-off, an exchange of the self, an exchange of

existence. In exploring my works with visibility and sensibility, the viewers essentially experience a relationship with the cones themselves.



Figure 2: *Transference* 2015, fired clay. This piece presents a starting point in exploring negative space and projection.

Another example of my early works is the sculpture ‘Transference’ which first explored my interest in negative space and projection. ‘Transference’ consists of five cylindrical fired earthenware pieces. The largest ceramic piece is on its back, resting on two cylinder pieces, it has a stylistic human face facing upwards with one eye open and the other closed. A faint sound of echoing pinging sound can be heard from within. The audio echoes around the space so viewers were trying to find the source of the sound. Once they discovered the sound was coming from within ‘Transference’, they experience an “Oh, I see!” moment. The main piece being at knee-height, the viewers have to bend their knees and tilt their heads to look inside.

Inside, there are two smaller cylindrical vessels, each with a face. Looking through the hollow object, the viewers project themselves through the tunnel-like piece. The two smaller ceramic heads inside symbolically represent transference between two ends of the tunnel. This piece best manipulates the viewers' movement to be involuntary for most of the experience.

Characteristically, my installations are a backdrop, a landscape for sounds and experiences. Everything is rendered down into its most basic and instinctual form. There is not only a lack of a face, a presence or outside content, my work is also cosmetically barren as well. My ceramic pieces are raw and simple. My works are a self-portrait, portraying the simple-ness of my bodily senses and human experience. Each object is a vessel waiting for adaptation to happen. The inside of each cylinder offers experiences similar to that of a seashell, an ear canal, a cave, a tunnel. The phenomenological nature of my work takes on several aspects. The surfaces, color, texture and metaphysical nature of my objects are both familiar and unfamiliar. As our bodies react with unfamiliar environments or objects, our senses involuntarily respond with both caution and curiosity. The objects' texture and color remind us of archaic origins, of primal origins, figuratively taking us back in time to how we moved with our bodies before we spoke with language. "Sculpture wants to be a place, wants to offer us a space for thought and feeling" (Gormley 24). Sculptures can be walked around and visually explored on all sides, as the surface and material is that of a landscape. This was addressed by an art critic, W.J.T. Mitchell, who analyzed artist Antony Gormley's looming figural sculptures. "Sculpture wants both a place to be *and* to be a place" (Gormley 251). He concluded that Gormley's sculptures are a place, always have been and that other sculptures can become a place if they want to. My sculptures are a place within a place; interactions with the object is now all that matters. The

interior space is where conversation happens, inside is where exchange of information happens and through it all is where human experience happens.



Figure 3: *Three Way* 2016, fired clay. This installation shows the simple, raw and vessel-like nature of cones.

Essentially being a place within a place, my objects house sound and curiosity. However, rather than to merely observe pieces of art, this series of works is about experience through the art. My sculptures are vessels for human sensation. They have no face, no identity and are becoming-animal just like in Francis Bacon's paintings. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze in his book, *The Logic of Sensation*, deconstructed components of Francis Bacon's paintings, "The deformations in which the body undergoes are also the *animal traits* of the head....in fact, the face lost its form by beings subjected to the techniques of rubbing and brushing..." (Deleuze 21). It is the process of disfiguring the figure's face that Bacon de-faces the figure, gives the figure no identity, paints a sensation in place then the figure is becoming-animal. "Sometimes

the human head is replaced by an animal; but it is not the animal as a form but rather the animal as a *trait*...for example a real dog, is treated as the shadow of its master..." (Deleuze 21). However unsettling Bacon's paintings are, he managed to 'paint the sensation' and through my sculptures, the sensations offered are also animal-like. "The Figure is the sensible form related to a sensation; it acts immediately upon the nervous system, which is of the flesh, whereas abstract form is addressed to the head, and acts intermediary of the brain, which is closer to the bone." (Deleuze 34). The human sensation, if painted or sculpted, can be felt by the audience. My ceramic pieces are de-faced, for they do not have any human or animal facial characteristics, there is no sense of identity and yet, they reveal the essence of sensory sensations in all of us. The insides of each cone is like that of an ear canal, a main sensory tool for sound, and represents human nature through sensory experience.

It is through the body that we are able to think. Without the human body, we would lack the capability to see color, sense warmth, feel emotions or think thoughts. This world of sensation grant us a history from which we can make references. Hearing, tasting, touching, smelling and seeing, these five senses grant us the possibilities of pain, comfort, hot, cold, hunger, fullness, etc. These lead us to other possibilities such as emotions and thought. From happiness to sadness, ugliness to beauty, war to peace, we are all essentially the same human animal. By having human experiences, sensing the world with our bodies, we can therefore make conclusions in our heads. With our bodies and minds as tools that we use to experience life, we can discover our personalities, identity, needs and wants. In order to make advancements for humanity's future, we need to take care of both our bodies and minds.

In an increasingly modern world with advancing technology, societal pressure and distractions, it becomes hard to express ourselves and be in control of our identities. Our brains have an infinite capacity to absorb information and to think and in order to sustain our minds, we have to sustain the vessel that holds our mind. In other words, our bodies need to be nourished and replenished, not with just food and rest and exercise but also with human experiences. It is not enough to just feed the body and recharge it with sleep. We were born cradled in our mothers' arms and nurtured by human touch. Humans are social creatures who need to physically move around in order to experience emotional contact. Through my work, my objects are to serve as reminders and to assist us in experiencing sensory moments. By moving our bodies and interacting one-on-one with the object or with another viewer, we are able to realize our minds and bodies depend on one another.

This body of work manipulates the viewer's body in order for the viewer to achieve bodily awareness. Objects placed low or high in the gallery, my viewers compromise their bodies in order to explore my objects. First the audience is lured in with curiosity where they become immersed in the warm flesh colors of the gallery then the body engages in physical exploration around each object. After observation and sensory input, the mind gauges its findings and ponders further exploration. Further exploration between the viewer and object, it becomes a personal venture and the viewer will walk away, having explored something new. Essentially, the audience must physically alter their movements, un-condition themselves from a socially accepted habitual stance and explore the object with no restraints. This is the in-between place, to not capture but generate a space of interaction. This is a place of opportunity where all or most viewers who pass through will be changed. Through the space of interaction,

the viewers engage themselves to project, to explore and discover within themselves. It's the self, spirituality, interrelationships, a place where transformations happen. It's phenomenological. To generate a space of interaction is to use our sensory experiences to become creators of our minds, mold our identities, share our experiences and give each other's lives meaning. As subtle as it can be, all viewers who have witnessed their own changes now walk away, having been affected, no longer the same as before and can never be. They now hear the world differently.



Figure 4: *2016 MFA Exhibition* installation consists of fired clay, canvas fabric and audio and light components. This installation shows six ceramic cones, where each piece is to be experienced with hearing, vision or touch.

Works Cited

Bermúdez, José Luis. "Bodily Awareness and Self-Consciousness." *The Oxford Handbook of the Self*. Ed. Shaun Gallagher. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011. Online.

Dachis, Adam. "What Lying Actually Does to Your Brain and Body Every Day." *Lifehacker*. 2012. Web. 19 Apr. 2016. <<http://lifehacker.com/5968613/what-lying-actually-does-to-your-brain-and-body-every-day>>.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2004. Print.